



Pick Your Path to Health

Fishing Trip Lessons

By Cathy McCarthy
Anishinaabe - Metis (Non-status)

During my brothers' thirteenth year, my father took each one of them, in their turn, on a fishing trip. What they didn't know, as they set out toward the lonely northern bush, was that they were about to receive my father's wisdom and values on the sacredness of women. Far away from any other living human, but nestled in the arms of our ancestors, my father would begin. My brothers told me he wouldn't start his lesson until he had rowed them out into the middle of the lake so that the only escape was into the crystal cold water. This is what he said, from what I can piece together.

"Your mother endured great pain to bring you into this world. She put aside all her fear to take care of your every need. All women are born with this courage and potential. That is why you must respect and honor all women.

"Your mother used her creativity to turn what little I brought her, into food and clothing for you. That is why it is good to give as much as you can to a woman. She will always make the best use of everything.

"Your mother serves herself last whether it is with food, clothing, or safety. That is why you must always look out for her welfare, because she looks out for everyone else.

"Women are the sacred keepers of our past, present, and future wellbeing. Treat every woman you meet with the utmost respect. And treat the woman that you marry as the most precious part of your life."

While he spoke these lessons to his sons, he always made sure that we, his daughters, demanded that same respect from every man we met by honoring ourselves and acting only in a sacred manner.

When it comes to talking about sexuality and the serious problem of sexual assault among Indian women today, our traditional sense of modesty can get in the way. But for the sake of finding our path to health, let us put our discomfort aside and face up to this crisis.

Indian women are raped at a rate more than double of that reported for all races, according to the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics. And this

number must be set against the fact that an estimated 70 percent of the assaults don't get reported. This is because of our sense of modesty and shame. It is also because we don't trust the authorities, whether tribal or non, to deal properly with us, and because we are afraid of being isolated by our families especially if the perpetrator is a friend or relative. The effects of sexual assault are deeply felt within other problems too. Ninety percent of the Indian women in alcohol and drug treatment programs are victims of rape and childhood sexual assault. (Terri Henry, Cherokee, "Tribal Responses to Violence Against Women," Presentation to Federal Bar Association Conference, Indian Law Section, Albuquerque, NM, April 2, 1998)

Sexual assault is essentially an act of violence. It is one important aspect of the violence that plagues Indian communities in general. It is the consequence of internalizing social and personal oppression for seven generations. It continues because none of our leaders seem to be able to figure out whether it falls under Tribal, State, or Federal jurisdiction.

So it is up to us, the creative, strong, and selfless women of my father's teachings to lead the way to healing and to stop this problem now.

As in all things, the disease can only be cured if we address the root cause of it. It is often said that violence is a desperate act of taking control committed by those who feel powerless. So it makes sense to nurture power and self control within all of our children so that they will not need to commit such acts. Now that we are fighting to take back our power by reconstructing our families, our communities, and our cultures, we must make sure that each person is also rebuilt with a sense of power and self control, with the values and the pride of our traditions of peace and respect.

Each young man is owed his own special time, his own fishing trip, with a father or an Elder who will take the time and energy to pass down the sacredness of women to his son. Each young woman is owed a parent or Elder's respect and expectation for her sacredness and her unique place in the circle of life. To live up to the expectations of a proud parent or Elder is to accept ownership of that expectation, and ownership of one's place as an integral member of the community and tribe.

On a more practical level, we need to teach our daughters and our sons, from a young age, to trust their own senses when it comes to what is acceptable behavior and contact with other children, friends, and family members. Teach them how to say, no, how to back off from unwanted

touch or talk. Show them everyday that you trust them, that you want to know if their good sense has been violated, that you will take seriously what they tell you, even if it is hard to hear. You will protect them if they ask for protection. Above all you expect them to be truthful because you are truthful to them.

In this way you will be laying the foundation for the future when they will have to protect themselves. You will be teaching them that they are in control, they have the power to say no, they have the strength to respect when they hear, no.

The rate of sexual assault will go down in our communities only when the lessons that my father taught his sons with words in the middle of the lake, and his daughters with example everyday are internalized by every man and woman. Then the confusion that our leaders have in deciding who will police and who will punish the crime of sexual assault will not matter so much. Before contact, Indian Nations had no need for judicial systems based on crime and punishment. If we return to the path of relying on our creative ways, our sense of duty and respect, and our belief in the relatedness of all things, then we will quickly find our way to a complete and sustaining state of health and wellbeing.

Here are some resources to help you start those difficult conversations with your kids.

Rape101.com: Resources and education for stopping rape.

<http://www.rape101.com>

(You can ask a librarian at your local library to make paper copies of this resource)

National Indian Women's Health Resource Center, NIWHRC

<http://www.niwhrc.org/>

NIWHRC

23272 Hwy. 82

Park Hill, OK 74451

Telephone: 918-456-6094

Fax: 918-456-8128

Email: peiron@niwhrc.org

Mending the Sacred Hoop

STOP Violence Against Indian Women Technical Assistance Project

202 East Superior Street

Duluth, MN 55802

Phone: 218-722-2781 or 1-888-305-1650

Fax: 218-722-5775

Web site: www.msh-ta.org

National Women's Health Information Center

<http://www.4woman.gov/>

Call Toll-Free 800-994-9662

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."